

March 19, 2017 – Third Sunday in Lent



## **“Authenticity/Courage/Compassion: Shared Need”**

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

*John 4:5-30, 39-42*

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Do you know that the dialogue between Jesus and this woman is the longest conversation anywhere in the whole Bible? Twice as long as Jesus' exchange with Nicodemus that we heard last Sunday. That's how important the message of this story was to the writer of this gospel. In John's Gospel, this woman is the first person to engage in a serious theological discussion with Jesus and the first to acknowledge him as the Christ. A woman. A Samaritan. Jesus talks with her. Jesus takes her seriously. Jesus drinks from her ritually unclean Samaritan bucket. How amazing is that?!

If last week I convinced you that it was extraordinary for Jesus and Nicodemus to take the risk of talking with one another, this week we're taking it to a whole new dimension. This encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is exponentially more extraordinary. The authenticity, compassion, and courage required for these two to not only meet and talk, but to share the gift of life with one another is an example of resurrection here and now that transforms all relationships, human and divine. No boundaries, no walls. No profiling, no taboos. No language barrier, no cultural divide. No gender gap, no racial/ethnic segregation. No us and them.

In last week's story we remember, Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night to learn about being born of water and the Spirit. Today, we develop that theme further, but the situation could hardly be more different. Jesus and the woman at the well. Instead of being questioned by a leader of the Jews, a learned Pharisee, Jesus is here confronted by a marginal, unnamed woman of questionable character. Not only that, this woman was not even a Jew but a despised Samaritan. Rather than occurring under cover of darkness, this exchange takes place in the glaring light of the burning noonday sun. And unlike Nicodemus who sought Jesus out, there is no apparent intentionality in today's encounter: the two just seem to run into each other. There they are, out in the middle of the desert. There are no crowds around this time, no disciples; just two at-risk people at an ancient watering hole. Jesus and the woman at the well. Two very thirsty people needing waters to live.

To set the scene:

The disciples have gone off to buy food, leaving Jesus alone in a dry land. He could have died of thirst. He finds a well all right, but then has no cup or bucket with which to draw water and drink. He desperately needs water to stay alive.

There is someone at the well who can assist him—but it turns out to be just about the last person on earth Jesus might want to encounter there. It's a woman, at a time when Jewish rabbis were not to engage women in conversation. Period. And not only that, but this is a divorced woman. A woman with a shady past some said.

That's the only way to explain what she was doing out there that day all alone. Women usually went to the well in small groups in the cool of the morning. They went together-- friends, neighbors, family. Then as now it was dangerous to be in the desert all alone. The fact that this woman is out there alone at the hottest time of the day tells us that she had no friends, no family, that even her own people had rejected her. This woman needs living water, the water of love, the water of life.

But still, there's another problem, another barrier between these two. She was a Samaritan. The enemy. Ritually unclean. At that time, Jews would have avoided traveling through Samaria but would have instead taken the extra nine hours to go around. And yet, Jesus seems to have told his disciples to journey right into enemy territory, in order to be in the place he needed to be that day.

So what happens between these two is truly astonishing. Nothing short of miraculous. These two strangers, these two enemies, these two whose worlds should never have connected—these two discover that they need each other.

Jesus seems to know everything about the woman's life. He speaks truth to her, and in that honesty and grace offers her living water. She so needed the living water only he could provide, to find healing and wholeness and a whole new life.

At the same time, Jesus, too, needed fresh water to drink, water she could draw from the well in her bucket. At the well, we see that the Jewish Jesus and the Samaritan woman need each other to live. A cup of water to restore the body. Living water to revive the soul. At the well, these two strangers connect in mutual need and vulnerability to share the gift of life.

Today after worship, we have the opportunity to hear the report back from our Haiti Team, fresh off their time in Sobier. I've heard a few stories this week. I know that we are all not only grateful for their service, but deeply moved by their witness.

One of the stories I've heard this week is about water. Do you know that for over 1 billion people in this world today safe water is scarce? As the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, almost half the population of Haiti does not have access to safe water. Waterborne illnesses, such as typhoid, cholera, and chronic diarrhea, are the cause of more than half of the deaths in the country every year. Contaminated water is also one of the leading causes of childhood illness and the very high infant death rate.

Women carry most of the responsibility for obtaining water for their family, much like the Samaritan woman in today's story.

The team met a British doctor at the Methodist Guest House who has served in Haiti for many, many years. He showed them an inexpensive and very doable way to purify water for drinking. It's so simple, yet so effective. You put your water in a clear, non-colored plastic water bottle, seal it tight, leave it under the morning sun for some time. The sunlight itself purifies the water, making it safe to drink.

The women of our team wanted to share this life-giving approach with the women of Sobier. With the help of the lay leader and translator, they gathered at the Catholic church and our women developed a rapport with them, gained their trust, demonstrated this process, leaving behind an incredible gift—water they can use for cooking and drinking. No cost. No fancy equipment. Potable water.

But that's not the whole story, as I heard it told. It wasn't just about "us" doing something for "them." It's a story about breaking down the language and cultural and racial barriers that might have separated them. It's a story about new relationships of love and trust beginning to form. It's a story about life-giving water welling up in the hearts and souls of our team members who discovered within themselves new sources of strength and faith and hope that they had not thought possible.

This is a story about authenticity, compassion, and courage that reminds us of our mutual need and vulnerability, that reminds us of our common humanity and our shared destiny on this earth. It's a story that shows forth the power of our God to bring forth life in situations of dire need and in our blinded hearts.

We know that we can live for a while without water, but not for long. We know that we can live for a while without love, but not for long. We know that the world can exist for a while with people boxed into various opposing camps, but not for long. Without water, without love, without mutual respect and relationship, we will die.

Hope is found in reconciling the differences that divide us from one another in this world, indeed from our own deepest humanity. Safe water for the body, life-giving water for the soul.

The fate of the people of Haiti is our fate. The life of the people of Haiti is our life. The children of Haiti are our children. This we know in our bones, and in our heart of hearts. And we know this as well. That God's gifts are for all. That clean water and God's life-giving water are given for all.

From Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we have this astonishing example of resurrection here and now that transforms all relationships, human and divine. No boundaries, no walls. No profiling, no taboos. No language barrier, no cultural divide. No gender gap, no racial/ethnic segregation. No us and them.

What a privilege it is to be part of this community of faith that dares to live into resurrection depths of authenticity, compassion, and courage. May God empower us to witness to what we see and what we know wherever living water can bring life for all.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Notes:  
The Water Project, Inc.